DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 321 846 PS 018 896

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TITLE Building Liaisons for Young Children: Successful Collaborative Efforts Within the Southern Region Prekindergarten Project.
PUB DATE 89
NOTE 14p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Advisory Committees; *At Risk Persons; Early Childhood Education; *Educational Cooperation; Guidelines; *High Risk Students; *Poverty Areas; *Preschool Education; *Program Development; Public Schools; School Districts
IDENTIFIERS *Southern Illinois University Carbondale

ABSTRACT

Collaborative efforts supporting the formation of early childhood units in the public schools are described. The efforts focused on experience gained in the Southern (Illinois) Region Prekindergarten Project's (SRPP) program of early childhood services for at-risk children. The SRPP began in 1988 with 6 programs in 10 school districts in 3 southern counties and expanded to include 11 programs at 10 public school sites in 22 school districts of 4 counties. Collaborating in the project and involved in scores of linkages were four organizations: The Illinois State Board of Education, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, public schools in the participating districts, and a Regional Advisory Council. Linkages were also made with special education districts, Head Start, the Department of Children and Family Services, the Department of Public Aid, the Department of Mental Health, and adult education and literacy programs, such as Literacy Connection and Literacy Project. Phases of collaboration are discussed, including: (1) getting started by setting goals; (2) joining together; (3) making gains; (4) reaching out; and (5) looking to the future. (RH)

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Building Liaisons for Young Children: Successful Collaborative Efforts Within The Southern Region Prekindergarten Project

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Prekindergarten programs in the public schools -- can they succeed? Those of us who are involved in the Southern Region Prekindergarten Project have discovered that such programs do indeed work, and that they are instrumental in making quality prekindergarten experiences available to larger numbers of children who are otherwise at risk of failure even before they enter kindergarten. We have found, moreover, that a critical factor in the success of the Project, which was established specifically for children at risk, is its strong collaborative base. In fact, it has become increasingly obvious to us that in order to advocate for children and to improve early childhood services in our area, concerned groups must make vigorous collaborative efforts which focus on the best interests of children and communities.

Getting Started: Setting Goals

The necessity of forming partnerships to support early childhood units in the public schools was stressed by Schultz and Lombardi (1989) in their report on the NASBE Task Force on Early Childhood Education. MacCarry (1989) and Friedberg (1989) also advocate linkages between child care programs and other agencies. Our experience supports these ideas.

Like other early childhood educators, we had long been aware that more should be done at the local level to provide children from all backgrounds with better chances of success when they enter school. Since 1985, prekindergarten programs which reach out to children at risk have proliferated in Illinois. Our own program began operating in 1988. Right from the start we knew that to make this program prosper and grow, we would need to build upon and strengthen links already forged when the Project went into action. And we knew we would need to continue to develop new coalitions whenever the opportunity arose.

We focused on several general but crucial goals:

- Providing mutual support for all parties concerned.
- Educating the public about what is truly appropriate for all children and hence for communities, society, and the nation.
- Coordinating training (through the university), practice (in the local schools), and policy-setting (by the state agency).
- Raising the awareness level of administrators, teachers, and parents concerning appropriate teaching practices for young children.
- Developing successful programs for children at risk.
- Improving collaboration and articulation between prekindergarten, kindergarten, and primary education.

Joining Together

In Fall 1988 the Southern Region Prekindergarten Project began operation in five public schools (10 school districts) in three southern Illinois counties. We began with six programs. We have since expanded to include 11 programs at 10 public school sites incorporated in 22 school districts of four counties: Franklin, Jackson, Perry, and Williamson. In the future we hope to expand further and reach more children.

Broadly speaking, who is involved in collaborating to make the Project a model program? Although we identify and discuss four general categories there are, within these groups, literally scores of linkages essential to our program's functioning.

The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) is the state agency which funds and oversees the Project grant. But it doesn't end there. ISBE is actively providing leadership, expertise, direction, and means and personnel for monitoring and evaluating.

Southern Illinois University at Carbondale (SIU-C) administers the grant. SIU-C provides, trains, and coordinates staff for the Project. As the Project grows, so does its staff, which is headed by Beverly Gulley as Project Director. This year we have two program coordinators, two parent coordinators, a language specialist, a research coordinator, 20 classroom teachers, and one home-based program teacher. Of course, there are many other staff members in various capacities.

Early childhood faculty at SIU-C develop and direct the programs in the public school settings. This is not always easy: physically, the sites must conform to appropriate standards for very young children; academically, public school personnel are often unprepared for the developmental needs of children of this age; administratively, coordinating the related aspects of the programs such as meals, transport, time schedules, etc., can be one headache after another!

SIU-C faculty provide leadership, promote networking, monitor, field feedback, and evaluate. Through orientation sessions, workshops, and get togethers, our team reaches out to kindergarten and primary teachers, principals, and administrators, because we realize the urgent need to articulate sound early childhood education units.

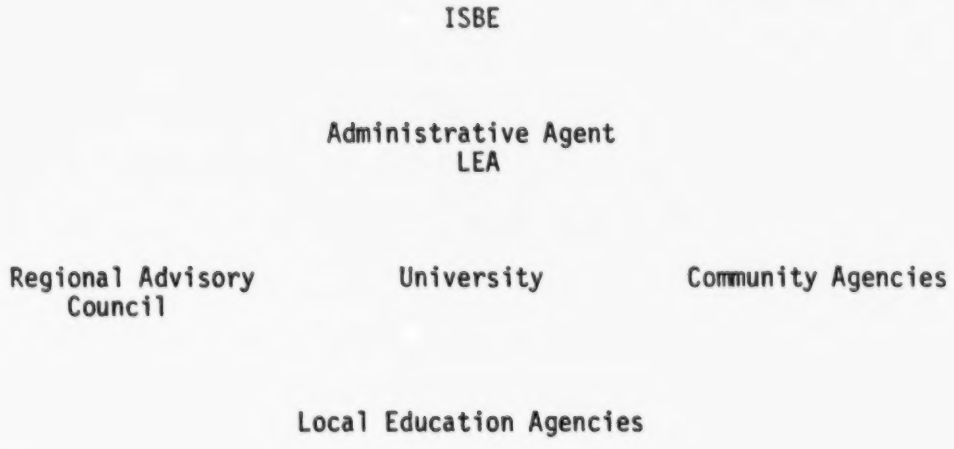
Public schools in 22 school districts participate in the Project. The Murphysboro Community School District is the administrative agent. Programs are situated in schools in Benton, Crainville, Johnston City, Marion, Mulkeytown, Murphysboro, Pinckneyville, Sesser, West Frankfort, and Zeigler.

ISBE, SIU-C, and the schools work closely with special education districts, Head Start, the Department of Children and Family Services, the Department of Public Aid, the Department of Mental Health, and adult education and literacy programs such as Literacy Connection and Literacy Project. Among other things,

these agencies aid in identifying children and families who might benefit from the Project. We also form cooperative linkages with private child care providers and services in the community.

Quite early on, we formed an Advisory Council consisting of representatives from all four groups. Administrators, teachers, parents, community workers, and project staff joined with the local education agencies (LEA) of the school districts to provide input and feedback. The Advisory Council ensures that specific community needs are addressed, provides awareness of the Project within the community, and promotes recruitment of families.

Figure 1



Making Gains

Obviously, to make any venture a success, all groups involved should be aware of tangible and intangible benefits. Plenty of good things are happening in this particular enterprise.

1. Illinois, like the rest of the nation, needs good teachers. The state's training needs for qualified individuals who can provide high quality early childhood services are being met through the Project. SIU-C provides expertise, courses, and training for teachers, while the schools serve as sites for practicum and training experiences.

2. Early childhood professionals conversant with current teaching, curriculum, and developmental research and practices provide leadership and guidance. There is a lot of theory floating around that needs to be put into practice. We are doing just that.

3. State policymakers work closely with university professionals, public school administrators, teachers, communities, and families at the local level.

4. It usually takes research a long time to filter down to schools. In this case, we are bringing current early childhood knowledge and practices directly to the classroom.

5. Teacher trainees are acquiring valuable practicum experiences in appropriate "real world" settings.

6. Model programs and environments are being made available to those who most need them.

7. By providing sites and participating in the Project, local schools are actively involved in the dynamic process of training excellent teachers, and implementing and disseminating appropriate early childhood educational practices.

8. Children who are at risk are getting enriching learning experiences in a nourishing environment, and are consequently better equipped to begin formal schooling on a more equal footing with their peers.

9. Families and community are becoming acquainted with appropriate educational practices and programs for young children.

10. Families are becoming aware of and utilize services already existing within the community, while community workers are made aware of families who may be in need of help. A system of mutual support is being built up.

Reaching Out

The liaisons already formed through the Project are growing, developing, stretching out in numerous directions. We reach out to people within the early childhood ecosystem; they, in turn, reach out to others.

1. Because of the way our school systems have traditionally been set up, school administrators are not always familiar with or equipped to deal with appropriate educational practices or

environments for very young children. Through workshops, discussion, and regular communication, Project staff and school administrators exchange ideas and learn from each other.

2. The at-risk programs are designed to prepare children for kindergarten and later schooling. Yet their very design -- they are child-oriented with child-initiated activities -- may put children at a disadvantage by exposing them to an environment which differs from that of many kindergartens today (Bredekamp and Shepard, 1989; Charlesworth, 1989). The push for more "academic" curricula is escalating downwards into kindergarten, often resulting in inappropriate, even harmful practices. Teachers are pressured to prepare children to meet next-grade expectations (Shepard and Smith, 1988) even though such practices may be in direct conflict with their philosophical beliefs (Hatch and Freeman, 1988). Thus, much of what we urge for prekindergarten children becomes futile in the face of accelerated academic curricula. But by joining together, administrators, early childhood professionals, policy makers, families and community are forming a support base for primary and kindergarten teachers.

There have been encouraging reactions. Kindergarten and primary teachers in the school districts involved have asked us to provide orientation and training sessions concerning the transition from prekindergarten to kindergarten, appropriate practices, and assessment. Building teachers have requested

assistance in setting up more child-oriented environments. And some district teachers have enrolled in early childhood courses to better understand their own role in fulfilling the needs of children.

3. To facilitate parent involvement in children's education, we are forging links between families, schools, teachers, and educational agencies. It is certainly heartening to see how intangible but strong barriers of discomfort and lack of communication, which so often stand between schools and families, are disintegrating before a personal approach:

- During the first week of school, we utilize a staggered orientation model to gradually introduce families to the learning experiences and environment provided by the Project. Parents and children attend a full session to experience at first hand what the program involves.

- Teachers visit homes several times during the semester. Almost all have declared that these visits promote understanding by challenging them to work with family background, experiences, and needs in mind, and by offering families a means of self-expression and support. Parents have stated that the visits help them see how home and family complement each other, and how a consistent atmosphere helps the child's personal, social, and cognitive development.

• Linda and Lucille, our parent coordinators, conduct workshops for parents on topics such as discipline, guidance, and responsibility. We feel these workshops are especially rewarding because the families we work with have little other exposure to research on child rearing and child development.

Looking to the Future

Forming liaisons and networks through the entire ecosystem of early childhood is an important step forward in providing quality early childhood education to all children. We challenge other educational organizations and projects to form similar partnerships. Before attempting this, you do need to take some preliminary steps:

1. Establish relationships with local districts to develop a foundation of mutual respect and trust.

2. Organize planning meetings where coalitions can be formed.

3. Talk with state agencies for assistance in formulating coalitions.

4. Solicit funds for pilot projects.

5. Build liaisons in incremental steps. Going too fast could be self-defeating.

In today's complex world, it is impossible for any one organization to provide appropriate and excellent learning opportunities for all our children. We have found that by forming

partnerships we are better able to advocate not only for children at risk, but for all children. Building strong liaisons for children is an idea whose time is here.

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